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'It felt like I mattered': Black male experiences - Seattle Times, The: Web Edition Articles (WA) - December 29, 2021
December 29, 2021 | Seattle Times, The: Web Edition Articles (WA) | Monica Velez; Seattle Times staff reporter

Cleveland High School student Trevon Mitchell counted himself lucky to have his first Black teacher in fifth grade. Then in seventh grade, Mitchell — who is Black — was paired up with a Black male mentor he could always confide in, as part of a Seattle Public Schools program.

"Ever since seventh grade I felt like I always had someone to talk to," said Mitchell, who is 16. "My teacher would make time after school and before school. I will always remember that teacher."

That's the kind of support and mentorship Seattle Public Schools wants for all of its Black students. A new report, released this month, outlines ways to get there.

It comes after the district has committed to improving racial equity in Seattle schools for years, with little success. Now, leaders are shifting their approach by focusing more on student experiences, rather than measuring success solely on test scores. The new approach emphasizes student and family recommendations in an effort to make the education system work for students of color, specifically Black male students.

The report makes four recommendations to meet the needs of Black males and also elevate other students of color: diversify the education workforce, integrate Black education into the curriculum, dismantle anti-Black racism, and center Black student and family voices.

The report is part of an initiative that launched in 2019, a few years after the disparity among test scores between Black and white students in Seattle Schools gained national attention.

"We need to start (with Black males) and then everybody else is lifted in this same process," said Mia Williams, assistant superintendent for the Office of African American Male Achievement, or AAMA, an initiative focused on integrating Black male student perspectives in every part of the district's departments and schools. "This is our start, this is our launch, this is our way to redesign schools to have an impact on all the (students') lives."

Seattle had the fifth-biggest gap in achievement between Black and white students when compared to the country's 200 largest school districts, according to a 2016 Stanford study. Seattle school leaders launched AAMA in 2019.

AAMA is focused on qualitative data and student experiences as a way to measure success, said Shelby Cooley, senior researcher associate for AAMA.

"As a system, we're also in a place where we're really trying to understand the full measurement portfolio that kind of gets us to a deeper understanding of truth and student experience that isn't just heavily reliant on assessment and test scores that do not tell us how our communities are doing, how our students are feeling," Cooley said.

This way of measuring success hasn't been done before in Seattle, Williams said, so AAMA is setting a baseline.

The 29-page report, "Our Voice Our Vision: Strategies for Honoring and Supporting Black Excellence In Seattle Public Schools," was a result of the research and engagement work that's also part of the initiative.

From August 2020 to April 2021 AAMA leaders and students lead 28 focus groups with Black teens and their families.

"We're not asking families and students to rubber-stamp something, but they are co-authors in building what is best for them," Williams said. "If we're asking students and families for their intellectual property then we need to pay them for that."

Mitchell, the Cleveland student, helped lead some of the discussions. For some students, he said, it was the first time they were in a space with other Black teens where they could talk about their experiences without judgment. One of the main things emphasized was to "celebrate your Blackness," he said.

"It felt like I mattered," Mitchell said. "Especially as a young Black man."

Most teens in the focus groups led by Mitchell agreed that the district needed more Black counselors, teachers and administrators. The report recommends diversifying the workforce and supporting Black teachers by providing mentorship for and by Black staff and other employees of color.

The district has already started those efforts.

Earlier this month, Seattle School Board members renewed a contract with the city of Seattle Department of Education and Early Learning that aims to diversify the educator workforce. The five-year, $3.8 million contract is funded through the Families, Education, Preschool, and Promise Levy approved by voters in 2018. Before the renewal, Seattle Schools and the city had two one-year contracts; the five-year contract will provide greater continuity.

Although the majority of new hires in the 2021-22 school year were white, the district made progress on its efforts to diversify the staff, hitting all its benchmarks.

Out of the 282 teachers hired in the 2021-22 school year, about 32% identify as people of color, meeting the district's goal. Of those new hires who are people of color, 9% of teachers are Black, 8% are Asian or Pacific Islanders, 7% are Hispanic or Latino, and 8% are two or more races.

About 54% of those hired for school leadership goals were people of color, surpassing the district's goal by 10%. About 46% of central office management hires were also people of color, which is two percentage points higher than the district's goal.

The district is also making progress on integrating Black education and identity affirmation — teaching students to develop positive feelings of belonging to a group they identify with — in

instruction, another recommendation in the report. This includes increasing access to Black and other ethnic studies classes for all students, as well as promoting career awareness, including life-relevant skills in courses (time management, financial literacy and problem solving), and providing students with information on their post-high school options.

The school board has also approved a new Philippine studies class and will provide more opportunities to take Black studies classes — most students have only been able to take it during 0 period, an extra class students can take before school starts.

The report also recommends improving learning environments by dismantling anti-Black racism. In order to get there, the district needs to promote accountability, make sure school resources are distributed equitably, implement policies to eliminate unjust discipline and strengthen communication around appropriate student placement in special education, the report says.

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Still, the district has a long way to go. From 2015 to 2018 — the most recent years for which figures are available — the number of Black male students in special education classes increased, according to enrollment data from Seattle Schools. By 2018, 23% of Black male students were in special education classes, about 5% more than white male students.

In 2018, about one-third of Native American male students were in special education courses.

About a quarter of Hispanic male students were in special education classes, and 13% of Asian males were in special education classes.

The report's final recommendation: Continue community engagement that builds trust by centering Black student and family voices, creating deeper relationships in the Black community, and improving parent and teacher communication.

In seventh grade, Mitchell was part of the Kingmakers of Seattle, an elective program for middle and high schoolers taught by Black males. The program launched in 2017 and has an African-centered curriculum that emphasizes increasing literacy, building self-esteem, and teaching Black history. And it matched Mitchell up with his seventh-grade mentor.

Many families wanted their elementary-aged children to be able to participate in Kingmakers, and as a result the district has expanded the program to third graders and up, Williams said.

But Williams said there is still a lot more work to be done. She hopes that one day the district won't need an office dedicated to uplifting Black males because the system will work for all students. And she noted that the responsibility to improve achievement doesn't solely lie with Seattle Public Schools:

"This is going to take Seattle as a whole to really make a lot of these things come true."

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